

# FORGIVENESS: THE MISUNDERSTOOD VIRTUE

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Many Christians struggle with forgiveness. It's not that they struggle with the willingness to forgive. They want to forgive those who wrong them, and have even proclaimed their forgiveness toward them to God in prayer. And yet, they continue to struggle with feelings of anger, resentment, and bitterness. Because the negative emotions remain, they conclude that their forgiveness must not have been genuine and affirm their forgiveness to God once again. The feelings remain, and so the cycle continues. In desperation, they wonder "How does one *truly* forgive?"

What's the problem? The problem is not with their desire or sincerity, but with their understanding of Biblical forgiveness. There are three misunderstandings about forgiveness that are pervasive in the modern church:

1. Thinking forgiveness requires an emotional change
2. Thinking forgiveness is a unilateral transaction
3. Thinking forgiveness is unconditional

None of these ideas can be found in Scripture. In contrast, the Bible teaches that

1. The purpose of forgiveness is the reconciliation of personal relationships
2. Forgiveness requires the participation of two parties (the offender and the offended)
3. Forgiveness can only be granted to the repentant

Before we examine each of these ideas, it's important that we first establish a Biblical definition of forgiveness. While the Bible often commands us to forgive (Mt 6:12; 18:35; Mk 11:25; Lk 6:37; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), it rarely defines or describes what forgiveness is. What exactly are we being commanded to do? What does forgiveness entail? What does it look like to forgive someone?

Many Christians understand forgiveness in purely emotional terms. They think it is about releasing the negative feelings toward those who have wronged them. While there is definitely a place for that, Scripture never describes that process as "forgiveness." Instead, Scripture describes forgiveness as a "cleansing from sin," "remembering their sins no more," "not counting their sins against them," and "covering" sins (Nehemiah 4:5; Psalm 32:1; 85:2; Jeremiah 31:34; 33:8; Romans 4:7; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Hebrews 8:12; James 5:20; 1 Peter 4:8; 1 John 1:7-9). Forgiveness is actually a monetary concept in which a creditor cancels a debt someone owes him (Matthew 6:12; 18:23-35; Luke 7:41-48). If you owe me \$100 and I decide to cancel (forgive) that debt, you are no longer obligated to repay the debt. Even today, we call such an action "debt *forgiveness*." It's interesting, then, that when Jesus wanted to illustrate the concept of forgiveness, He told a parable regarding two men who owed a monetary debt to their masters (Matthew 18:23-35).

Biblical forgiveness is not about the canceling of monetary debt, but moral debt. Our sin is a moral debt that we have amassed against God and others. When we forgive someone, we cancel their moral debt against us. We no longer hold it against them. We affirm that the moral debt is no longer owed, and any punishment due for their sin will be abrogated. We expunge the record of the moral crimes they committed against us – not from our memories (which is impossible), but in our actions. Forgiveness is displayed in the way we treat those who have sinned against us. It's displayed in what we do – not necessarily in how we feel.

The act of forgiveness, then, is the choice to release someone from their moral liability and pursue reconciliation with them. It is a decision not to hold someone accountable for their sin. To forgive is to erase a person's sin from their moral ledger, so to speak. In forgiveness, we entrust to God the justice that is due to the person who wronged us. We transfer the responsibility for that justice from us to God, trusting that He will take care of it in His own timing. As a result, we no longer have to worry about it or let it interfere with our relationships. Now, we can treat the person as if they had not sinned.

Now that we know the Biblical definition of forgiveness, let's look deeper into the three misunderstandings about forgiveness I identified earlier.

### **Forgiveness Requires an Emotional Change**

Many Christians have adopted a therapeutic view of forgiveness, seeing the release of negative emotions as the primary purpose of forgiveness. When Christians ask, "How do I forgive?" what they usually mean is, "How do I change my emotions so that I am no longer angry at the person who wronged me?" On this view, forgiveness is primarily for the benefit of the offended, not the offender. It is emotional therapy.

I've heard numerous sermons and memes promoting this view of forgiveness:

- "Forgiveness: a decision we make to release a person from the feelings of anger we have at them."
- "Unforgiveness is choosing to stay trapped in a prison of bitterness serving time for someone else's crime."
- "Forgiveness is not something we do for other people. It's something we do for ourselves to move on."
- "Forgiving doesn't make you weak. It sets you free."
- "Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace."

The therapeutic view of forgiveness is appealing, but suffers from one glaring problem: It has no basis in Scripture. Scripture never speaks of forgiveness in terms of how we feel or in terms of letting go of anger. Forgiveness is not about ridding ourselves of negative emotions toward people who have wronged us. While we should seek to purge any negative emotions we harbor toward those who have wronged us, this is not the purpose of forgiveness.

### The Biblical concept of forgiveness

The purpose of forgiveness is to restore relationships.<sup>1</sup> The goal is reconciliation (Matthew 5:23-24; Luke 15:11-24; Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 2:6-8; 5:19-21; Colossians 1:14,20-22; 2:13; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13):

**Matthew 5:23-24** So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>22</sup> Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

**Matthew 18:15** If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

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<sup>1</sup>There is a difference between the meaning of forgiveness and the purpose of forgiveness. The meaning of forgiveness is to release someone of their moral debt, but the reason we release them from their moral debt is to restore relationship with them. Reconciliation can be thought of as both the purpose for and result of reconciliation.

**2 Corinthians 5:19** [I]n Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Forgiveness entails a commitment to restore a relationship that was fractured by sin. Sin has a way of causing a rift in our relationships. When your friend gossips against you, it brings distrust in your relationship and you naturally pull away from your friend. You may even end the relationship entirely. When your friend asks you to forgive her for her sin, is she asking you to merely change your emotional state? No, she is asking you to restore relationship with her. Yes, she wants you to stop being mad at her, but the reason she desires for you to experience that emotional change is because she knows your emotional state is connected to your willingness to be in relationship. The ultimate goal of her request for forgiveness is to restore the relationship. Your emotional change is just a means to the end.

Forgiveness starts with a decision to no longer hold a person's sin against them (e.g. not bringing up their sin in the future) and then proceeds to actions that deliver on and display that commitment – actions to restore the relationship. This is what God does when He forgives us. He chooses to “forget” our sin, abrogate the punishment that was due us for our sin, and restore our relationship with Him (Psalm 25:7; 79:8; 103:11-14; Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12; 10:17). He restores that relationship immediately, without us having to first “prove ourselves” to Him through some probationary period (Ephesians 1:7-11; 2:12-13; 4:18-24; Colossians 1:20-22).

God's forgiveness entails reconciliation. God does not forgive us to alleviate His “negative emotions,” but to restore relationship with us. Can you imagine if God were to say He forgives you for your sins, but still wants nothing to do with you? But on a therapeutic understanding of forgiveness, God could forgive us in the sense ceasing to be angry at us, all the while continuing to ignore us. The reason we ask God to forgive us is because we want relationship with Him. Likewise, human forgiveness entails a reconciliation of the relationship that was fractured by sin. That's why it makes no sense to “forgive someone from a distance.” While you say you no longer hold their moral debt against them (i.e. you forgive them), you continue to hold their moral debt against them by refusing to have a relationship with them. The Bible has no concept of forgiveness without reconciliation.

Forgiveness, then, is primarily a way of thinking and behaving, not a way of feeling. Forgiveness will change how we treat others, not necessarily how we feel toward others – at least not initially (I will say more about this later).

#### Forgiveness is about actions, not feelings

We know forgiveness cannot be about how we feel toward others because God commands us to forgive (Matthew 6:12,14-15; 18:21-22,34-45; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). You can't command someone to feel a certain way. You can only command actions, so Jesus' command to forgive cannot be a command regarding our feelings. Rather, it is a command to restore relationships.

The command to forgive is similar to the command to love. When God commands us to love others, He's not commanding us to feel a certain way about them, but to act a certain way toward them: to act in their best interest and treat them as we would want to be treated ourselves. That's why Jesus can tell us to love our enemies. He's not commanding us to have positive feelings about them, but to treat them in a loving way. You can obey God's command to love even if you could personally harbor negative emotions toward someone. The same is true of forgiveness. Forgiveness is about how we *treat* others rather than how we *feel* about others. "Forgiveness" that results in one feeling better emotionally but not in a restoration of relationship is not forgiveness at all. It is just an emotional release. Forgiveness is about *reconciling* relationships, not *releasing* negative emotions.

While forgiveness concerns our actions rather than our feelings, that does not mean our emotions are of no concern to God. They are, and we should actively seek to release our anger and bitterness toward others, but because emotional change often follows behavioral change, the emotional release we seek may only come after we have forgiven. First we choose to forgive – treating the offending person as if they had not sinned against us – and then we begin to feel differently toward them.

While forgiveness typically leads to changed feelings, we should not judge whether we have forgiven someone on the basis of how we feel toward them at the moment. We judge whether we have forgiven someone based on how we treat them. If we are no longer angry at our offender, but have not reconciled the relationship, then we have not forgiven him. If we reconcile the relationship, however, treating our offender as we did prior to his sin, then true forgiveness has been achieved – even if we still feel anger toward him for a period of time.

### Selfish forgiveness

I'm concerned that by thinking of forgiveness in terms of emotions and personal mental health, we have inadvertently turned the selfless concept of forgiveness into an act of selfishness. We forgive others because it benefits *us*; because it makes *us* feel better. In contrast, true forgiveness is primarily for the benefit of the sinner, not the one forgiving.<sup>2</sup> We forgive others for their sake, not our own. Not only does our forgiveness restore the relationship they long for, but it also helps to assuage their guilt for what they did. When God forgives us, it is also primarily for our own benefit – not His own. God doesn't forgive us so that He can feel better emotionally, but for our benefit – to restore our relationship with Him. Likewise, we should forgive others for their sake, not because it helps us feel better emotionally.

This self-focused and emotion-focused understanding of forgiveness has even given rise to the unbiblical notion that we need to forgive ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Some have taken it even further, suggesting that we need to forgive God if we are harboring anger against Him.<sup>4</sup> When one understands that forgiveness is about restoring relationships, and that forgiveness is primarily for the benefit of the offender, notions such as forgiving oneself and forgiving God become meaningless.

### **Forgiveness is a Unilateral Transaction**

“The ‘forgiveness’ of pop culture is a matter of personal psychological health that we perform by ourselves, for ourselves. ‘Forgiveness’ is essentially getting over an injustice; it is the near equivalent of releasing a grudge, and it can be accomplished unilaterally.”<sup>5</sup> If the essence of forgiveness is reconciliation, however, then forgiveness cannot be achieved through a solitary, internal process alone. Forgiveness is not the kind of thing you can do privately in prayer. True forgiveness requires the offended person to confront their offender and, upon his repentance, pronounce their forgiveness of him.

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<sup>2</sup>This should be obvious from the monetary roots of the concept. To forgive someone is to cancel their debts. Who is the primary beneficiary of such an act? Clearly, it's the debtor. The creditor is not benefited by it. The act is actually against his own interests. It's quite ironic, then, that we should conceive of forgiveness as primarily for the benefit of the person who was wronged (creditor).

<sup>3</sup>Jason Dulle, “You Can't Forgive Yourself”; available from <https://theosophical.wordpress.com/2018/03/06/you-cant-forgive-yourself/>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

<sup>4</sup>See Sam Storms, “Are We Supposed to Forgive God?”; available from <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/are-we-supposed-to-forgive-god>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

<sup>5</sup>Jerry Jarman, “Forgiveness in the Bible and in Pop Psychology”; available from <https://www.equip.org/articles/forgiveness-in-the-bible-and-in-pop-psychology/>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

This is what Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15: “If your brother sins against you, *go and tell him his fault*, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” He reiterated this in Luke 17:4 as well: “If your brother sins, *rebuke him....*” Most people are not comfortable with confrontation, however, so we have redefined forgiveness as a solitary act of emotional release, allowing us to forgive people from afar. In contrast, Biblical forgiveness is a bilateral transaction involving the interaction of two human beings: a confessor of sin and a forgiver of sin. Forgiveness is only achieved after each party has done his part, and the relationship is restored.

### Forgiveness is Unconditional

Many Christians believe that we are required to forgive everyone who sins against us, immediately and without condition – without any repentance on their part. It is true that we are commanded by God to forgive others, as these Scriptures attest:

- **Matthew 6:12,14-15** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,<sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
- **Matthew 18:21-22** Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.<sup>6</sup>
- **Matthew 18:34-35** And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.<sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”
- **Mark 11:25** And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.
- **Luke 6:37** Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.
- **Luke 11:4** And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
- **Luke 17:3** Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.
- **John 20:23** If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.
- **2 Corinthians 2:7** So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.
- **Ephesians 4:32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
- **Colossians 3:13** Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Notice, however, that none of these passages teach that we need to forgive the unrepentant. There are passages, however, that clearly teach forgiveness is conditioned on the sinner’s repentance. The preeminent example of this is none other than God Himself. Whether you understand forgiveness in a therapeutic sense (letting go of your anger toward a person) or a relational sense (restoring the relationship), God does not forgive in either sense unless and until one repents (2 Chronicles 7:14; Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 13:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 17:30-31; 20:21; Romans 2:4-5; 2 Corinthians

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<sup>6</sup>Some translations read “seventy times seven” (KJV, ASV, HCSB, LSB, NLT) while others read seventy-seven (NIV, ESV, NET, NASB, CEB, CEV, ISV). Both translations are possible. No matter how it is translated, it is clearly hyperbolic and meant to convey the point that there should be no limits to forgiveness.

7:10; 2 Timothy 2:25-26; 1 John 1:9). God is angry at sinners until they repent, and God does not restore relationship with sinners until they repent. If God does not forgive without repentance, why think Christians are required to forgive people who do not repent (or before they repent)? Surely God does not expect us to forgive those who do not repent when He Himself is unwilling to do so. If our forgiveness of others is patterned on God's forgiveness of us (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:31), then it should be obvious that we should only forgive the repentant.

The relational nature of forgiveness itself attests to the fact that forgiveness is conditional. Think about it. Relationships consist of two individuals, not one. Both people must do their part for reconciliation to take place. The one who sinned must be willing to repent for that sin, and the person who was wronged must be willing to forgive that wrong. If either fails to do their part, then there is no reconciliation. There is no forgiveness.

Luke 17:3-4 is clear that forgiveness is conditioned on repentance: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents, forgive him*, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Did you notice all of the conditional statements? "*If your brother sins,*" we are to rebuke him. The purpose of rebuking him is not to condemn him, but to elicit his repentance. The second conditional, "*if he repents, forgive him,*" is clear that forgiveness is conditioned on repentance. The third conditional, "*if he sins against you seven times,*" hammers home the point even further. We are to forgive our brother seven times *if* he repents seven times. Jesus did not say, "If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. If he doesn't repent, forgive him anyway." Each act of forgiveness is preceded by an act of repentance. Forgiveness is only extended to those who repent – not to those who don't. As such, the precondition for forgiveness is repentance.

Matthew 18:15-20 even provides us with a process for dealing with an unrepentant Christian who sinned against a brother:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

Note that Jesus did not say the offended brother should wait for the offending brother to seek him out. He said the offended brother should confront the offending brother privately in an attempt to restore the relationship. "If he listens to you" means the offending brother has repented over his sin. When he does so, the offended brother will forgive him, thus reconciling the relationship ("you have gained your brother"). The pattern Jesus established for us is to (1) confront, (2) repent, and then (3) forgive.

What if the offending brother does not repent after this private confrontation? Jesus did not say, "Oh well, you tried. Just forgive him anyway." Jesus considered the man's repentance to be so important that He commands us to confront this brother again, this time with two or three other Christians present to encourage the man to repent. If this second stage of discipline fails to produce repentance, the matter is to be brought before the church leadership.<sup>7</sup> If he will not heed their instruction either,

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<sup>7</sup>What constitutes "the church" is not clear. It could refer to the entire local congregation, but more likely, it refers to the local church leadership who is responsible for exercising church discipline.

they are to excommunicate him from the church and treat him as an unbeliever. In other words, there is no forgiveness extended to the man.

If God intended for us to forgive people immediately and without repentance, there would be no need for such a process. We would simply forgive the unrepentant brother and move on. Instead, we are to follow the process of escalated confrontation, and if it does not yield the desired result of repentance, the unrepentant Christian is to be disfellowshipped, not forgiven. According to Jesus, then, if there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness.

Finally, this same theme of conditional forgiveness is found in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35). The master did not automatically forgive his servant of his debt. In fact, he planned to punish him for not paying it off. He only forgave the servant after the servant asked for mercy (see verses 26-27, 29, 32-33). The notion that Christians must forgive the unrepentant is unbiblical.<sup>8</sup>

Some, upon hearing this, will understand me to be saying we should continue to be angry at those who have sinned against us until they repent. This sort of response, however, reveals the fact that they are still thinking of forgiveness in therapeutic terms. Of course one can and should rid themselves of any unhealthy anger they have toward the person who wronged them, whether they repent or not. But Biblical forgiveness is not about our feelings. It is about restoring relationships, and that cannot happen until the person who ruptured the relationship confesses their sin and seeks restoration. Once they seek it, we are obligated to restore relationship with them, no matter how we feel at the time.

#### The harm of forgiveness without repentance

Not only is the unilateral, therapeutic view of forgiveness unbiblical, but it can be harmful as well. We may release our anger toward the unrepentant person, but the relationship continues to suffer because the sin has not been dealt with. Even if we manage to treat our offender as we did prior to their sin, by privatizing our forgiveness rather than following Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18, we could be preventing our offender from repenting and making things right. We should not ignore their sin. "Ignoring sin teaches sinners that sin does not bring consequences. This is harmful to their souls. Continuing to have the benefit of a righteous relationship with another and yet remain in sin against that person results in fostering a habituation of sinful inclinations in their soul, which God says brings about suffering and death."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Arguably, John 20:23 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-8 also imply conditional forgiveness. In John 20:23 Jesus told the apostles, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." Unless we are to believe that Jesus was giving them the power to arbitrarily forgive anyone they wanted (including the forgiveness of the unrepentant and the unforgiveness of the repentant), then we should understand repentance as the implicit condition for Jesus' teaching. The apostles were to pronounce as forgiven those who repented, but not the unrepentant.

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 2:5-8, Paul gave instructions regarding the unrepentant man who was sleeping with his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). Paul had previously told the church to "deliver this man to Satan" as judgment for his sin. In his second letter, he speaks of this situation and tells the church "Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. <sup>6</sup>For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, <sup>7</sup> so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him." Paul is calling on the church to forgive the man. While Paul does not explicitly say he repented, I would argue that it is implied by the fact that Paul was willing to relent of the punishment. After all, the punishment was intended to bring the man to repentance ("for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." – 1 Corinthians 5:5). If he had not repented yet, Paul would be undermining the very purpose for the judgment in the first place.

<sup>9</sup>Kevin Lewis, "Conditional Forgiveness"; available from <https://www.facebook.com/kevin.lewis.77/posts/3469558173278?platform=hootsuite>; Internet; accessed 14 July 2015.

God does not treat us this way. He doesn't resume a relationship with us by choosing to ignore what we have done. Our sin has to be addressed. We had to repent before we could resume relationship with Him. We need to do the same with others. We ought not short circuit the repentance process by treating the unrepentant offender as if they had never sinned. Reconciliation is a privilege extended to the repentant, not a requirement for the offended Christian to extend to the unrepentant.

#### Should we remain angry with the unrepentant?

Does this mean we should be angry toward the unrepentant sinner and treat him badly? Does his lack of repentance justify our bitterness or hatred? No. We are to love all people whether they have repented or not (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27,35; Romans 13:8-10). We must not repay evil with evil or seek personal vengeance (Proverbs 24:29; Romans 12:17-19; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9-11), but rather do our best to live peaceably with all people (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14). We should help our enemies and do good to them (Romans 12:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15). We should not be bitter and angry toward anyone, but be kind and tenderhearted (Ephesians 4:31-32). We should be willing and ready to forgive if and when the offending person repents.

We do not need to forgive someone to rid ourselves of our anger. We can release our anger before they repent (if they ever repent), and before we forgive them. What we should not do, however, is act as if nothing is wrong in the relationship. Restoration of relationship is a privilege extended only to the repentant.

#### **Conclusion**

Forgiveness is not about our emotional states. Forgiveness is about restoring relationships that have been damaged by sin. Forgiveness is about how we treat the sinner, not about how we feel toward him. Forgiveness is not a solitary act whereby I privately tell God in prayer that I forgive my offender, but my pronouncement to my offender that their moral debt has been absolved and that our relationship has been restored.

True forgiveness means you no longer hold one's moral fault against him and seek to restore the relationship. True forgiveness requires that you not speak about his sin to others, nor bring it up again to be used against the offender in the future.<sup>10</sup>

While we should always be ready and willing to forgive, we only extend forgiveness to those who seek it in repentance. In the absence of repentance, there can be no forgiveness; however, the Christian can still maintain a disposition of peace and love toward the unrepentant.

We can and should seek to overcome our anger toward the sinner, even in the absence of his repentance. We are commanded to love our enemies and do good to those who harm us (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27,35; Romans 13:8-10), and to live peaceably with all people (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14). This includes the unrepentant. We should seek personal peace as well as peace with the unrepentant, but relational harmony only comes after repentance.

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<sup>10</sup>Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 190.

## Objections

### Jesus on the cross

The first and foremost objection to the conditional forgiveness view is Jesus' famous words on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). No one asked Jesus for forgiveness, and yet Jesus forgave them anyway. If Jesus is our moral example, shouldn't we forgive as well? A few things could be said in response.

First, Jesus' prayer only appears in Luke's gospel, and there is good reason to believe it was a second century interpolation into the text.<sup>11</sup> If Jesus never uttered these words, the supposed conflict is resolved. For the sake of argument, however, let's assume that these words were uttered by the historical Jesus. What, then? At best, this would seem to pit Jesus against Jesus. If Jesus taught that forgiveness is conditioned on repentance (Matthew 18:15-35; Luke 17:3-4), why would Jesus ask the Father to forgive the unrepentant? He would be contradicting His own teaching.

Second, notice that the text does not say, "I forgive you, for you know not what you do." It says "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus did not pronounce forgiveness on his murderers, but interceded on their behalf to God, petitioning God to forgive them for this evil deed. Surely, Jesus is expressing His desire for their forgiveness and His willingness to forgive, but He did not actually forgive anyone. In fact, His prayer demonstrates that He believed God alone was able to forgive them. Perhaps He prayed this prayer because (1) He knew He could not forgive them without their repentance, and (2) He knew He would not live long enough to forgive them if they repented for this sin in the future.

Third, *who* was Jesus asking the Father to forgive: the Jews or His Roman executioners? The answer matters, because the Jews clearly knew that they were doing wrong, whereas the Roman executioners did not. They were just doing their job, knowing nothing about the guilt or innocence of the man they were tasked with crucifying. Given the context, I would argue that Jesus was praying for the Roman executioners. The most direct antecedent is "they" in verse 33, which refers to the Roman soldiers ("there they crucified him"). Immediately after Jesus' prayer, Luke refers to another "they," saying "they cast lots to divide his garments" (verse 34). Once again, this is a reference to the Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; John 19:23). If the subject of both the preceding and proceeding context is the Roman soldiers, then the most natural identification of the "them" that Jesus prayed for is the Roman soldiers. Jesus asked the Father to forgive the Roman soldiers for crucifying Him because they did so in ignorance. They had no idea who Jesus was, nor that He was an innocent man. They were simply carrying out orders to crucify a man condemned by the State. Jesus, knowing that they would never seek forgiveness for a sin they did not even know they had committed, asked the Father to forgive them on their behalf.

At best, then, this verse would only support the idea of unilaterally forgiving those who unknowingly committed a sin against us. It would not support the idea of unilaterally forgiving those who knowingly committed a sin against us. Such sins should not be forgiven unless they repent.

### We need to forgive others because God forgave us

It is true that we should forgive others because God has forgiven us. Indeed, God's forgiveness of us is conditioned on our forgiveness of others (Mt 6:14-15; Mk 11:25; Lk 6:37; 11:4). But the question is not *whether* we need to forgive. Rather, the question is *who* we need to forgive: everyone, or only those

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<sup>11</sup>See Alan E. Kurschner, "From the Lips of Jesus or a Scribal Hand?: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'"; available from <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/textual-issues/from-the-lips-of-jesus-or-a-scribal-hand-father-forgive-them-for-they-do-not-know-what-they-are-doing-2/>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

who repent. It's evident that God does not forgive everyone. He only forgives those who repent. If He only forgives the repentant, and we are to pattern our forgiveness of others after His forgiveness of us, then we should only forgive the repentant as well.

#### Some relationships can't be restored to their pre-sin state

If forgiveness requires that we restore a relationship, does that require that we always treat the person as if they had never committed the sin? If so, this would lead to counter-intuitive and foolish decisions. For example, a parent would be required to allow their pedophilic relative private access to their child. A spouse would be prohibited from requiring her cheating husband to be accountable for his whereabouts, his phone usage, and electronic communications.

In some cases, it is not possible nor wise to rewind the relationship to exactly the way it was before. Trust that was lost will need to be earned again. While our goal should be to return the relationship as close to its pre-sin state as possible, forgiveness does not require the abandonment of wisdom. It simply requires that we re-establish some sort of relationship with our repentant offender. Once the relationship is re-established, additional steps may be required to regain trust or demonstrate true repentance (Matthew 3:8). In some cases (such as theft), restitution may be needed from our offender (Exodus 22:3,5; Leviticus 6:5; 24:18; Numbers 5:7; Luke 19:8). In other cases, wisdom may dictate that certain precautions be put in place. It's even possible that some sins will have legal consequences. For example, forgiving a pedophile does not mean we do not report him to the police and allow him to face the civil consequences for his actions.

#### Most passages demanding forgiveness have no conditions

Most of the passages commanding us to forgive others do not place any conditions on that forgiveness, such as the offender's repentance. Doesn't this mean, then, that there are no conditions?

No. We should not assume that every mention of a topic will include everything we need to know regarding it. In many cases, seemingly *carte blanche* statements made in one passage of Scripture are qualified in another. For example, Jesus said that if we ask anything in His name, He will do it (John 14:14). While that sounds like a blank check for answered prayers, we read in other passages that our prayers must be according to God's will (1 John 5:14) and cannot be used for our own lusts (James 4:3). Similarly, in Luke 16:18 Jesus taught that "everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." No exceptions are given. And yet, in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 Jesus makes an exception for sexual immorality. We interpret those passages which lack the exception in light of those that contain it. In a similar way, we interpret those passages with less detail in light of those with greater detail. As Kevin Lewis observed, "Other biblical texts that merely mention 'forgiveness' as a concept or an objective do not necessarily proffer every aspect of the doctrine of forgiveness. As such, they must be read in light of the clear conditions expressed in other passages."<sup>12</sup>

#### What about the dead?

If forgiveness requires repentance, does that mean forgiveness is impossible in the case of those who have died unrepentant? Yes. This situation is essentially the same as a living person who refuses to repent. The only difference is that with the living there is still hope for future reconciliation. With the dead, all such hope is gone.

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<sup>12</sup>Kevin Lewis, "Conditional Forgiveness."

One might have unresolved anger regarding a deceased person, but remember, forgiveness is not about resolving anger. Anger is resolved through the power of the Holy Spirit, and we can experience a release from anger even after our offender has passed away.

### Does Mark 11:25 show that forgiveness doesn't require repentance?

Jesus said, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mark 11:25). Does this verse support the concept of unilateral forgiveness?

No. Perhaps "Jesus is concerned about the attitude of the believer as he stands before God in prayer. If he is inwardly unwilling to forgive his brother or sister, he cannot expect forgiveness from the Father."<sup>13</sup> Or perhaps Jesus is addressing those who have been reluctant to forgive someone who has already asked for their forgiveness. If so, then Jesus' point is that we need to grant the requested forgiveness before we proceed on in prayer. Either way, this verse is perfectly consistent with the view of forgiveness presented in this paper.

It is interesting to note some striking similarities between Jesus' teaching in Mark 11:25 and His teaching in Matthew 5:23-24: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,<sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

There are obvious differences between the two accounts:

- In Mark, the person is praying, whereas in Matthew, the person is offering a sacrifice at the temple.
- In Mark, the person is the offended party, whereas in Matthew, the person is the offending party.

Despite these differences, both teachings address what would-be worshippers are to do when they realize that they are not reconciled to their brother. Matthew's account provides the most detail, instructing the worshipper to leave the temple, meet with the offended brother, reconcile with him, and then resume worship. If this is required of the offending person, wouldn't Jesus have required it of the offended person as well? After all, Jesus put the responsibility of confronting the offender on the person offended in Matthew 18:15-17 and Luke 17:3-4. If Jesus expected the offended brother to take the initiative when repentance is not forthcoming, it stands to reason that Jesus expected the offended man in Mark 11:25 to do the same. Once he recalls the offense, he is to stop praying, resolve the matter with his offender, and then resume his prayer.

### Wouldn't this require repentance for every sin?

If we are to forgive only those who seek forgiveness for their sin, wouldn't that require a lot of people to repent for a lot of things on a daily basis? Wouldn't this mean that every minor infraction requires repentance? If so, then most of our lives would be spent being out of relationship with people since few people are willing to repent. Even those who are willing to repent will be annoyed if we require their repentance for every small infraction.

It is true that requiring repentance for every minor infraction would be unlivable. However, there is no reason to think that we must require repentance for every minor infraction. Repentance should only be

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<sup>13</sup>Unknown author, "Forgiveness is Conditional"; available from <https://learntheology.com/forgiveness-is-conditional.html>; Internet; accessed 23 February 2021.

required in the case of serious infractions that seriously wound the relationship. For minor infractions, we can simply choose to overlook the matter. It's not that we are forgiving in the absence of repentance, but that there is no need for repentance or forgiveness because the infraction never ruptured the relationship to begin with. We never consider the issue to be a moral debt owed in the first place. We simply overlook the matter. As Solomon advised, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense" (Proverbs 19:11). Our love covers a multitude of sins and keeps no record of wrongs (Proverbs 10:12; 17:9; 1 Corinthians 13:5; 1 Peter 4:8).

How do we determine what is a serious infraction requiring repentance/forgiveness and what is a minor infraction that does not require repentance/forgiveness? This can only be decided by the individual, because what may be considered a serious issue by one person may not be considered a serious issue to another. The question is whether or not the offense has caused a genuine rift in your relationship that cannot be overlooked. If so, then repentance/forgiveness is required. Personally, if a friend spoke to me in a tone that I found a bit offensive, I may not have liked it, but it would not cause a rift in our friendship. I would simply overlook it. However, if that same friend stole a \$20 bill from me, it would cause a rift in our friendship and would require repentance/forgiveness.

One might object that this is subjective. Yes, it is, but this is to be expected. The Bible gives us objective principles related to forgiveness, not case laws. These objective principles need to be applied in real world circumstances, and it's not always clear how best to apply them. Godly people will have differences of opinion, but the subjectivity of what constitutes a serious issue does not negate the fact that all of us can distinguish between the categories of minor and serious infractions.

#### Stephen forgave his murderers without their repentance

Stephen seems to have forgiven those who stoned him without their repentance. In Acts 7:59-60 we read, "And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'<sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

There are two ways a doctrine might be taught in Scripture: (1) It can be taught explicitly or implicitly in a didactic way, and (2) it can be modeled by people in practice. For example, Jesus explicitly told us to baptize converts in Matthew 28:19, and we see that teaching modeled by His followers throughout the Acts of the Apostles. However, when we see something being practiced in Scripture without that practice also being taught by Scripture, we cannot conclude that the practice is intended as a model for us to follow. The text may simply be *describing* what was done, not *prescribing* that others should follow the same example. For example, the early church in Jerusalem chose to sell their possessions and distribute the money to other Christians that were in need (Acts 4:32-37). While they were free to do so, this practice is not taught in Scripture. This pericope is describing what the early church did, not prescribing that others do the same. The same could be true of Stephen. Perhaps he forgave his murderers without their repentance, but it would not follow from this description that we must do the same. At best, one could argue that Stephen's example gives us permission to do the same, but in the absence of Biblical teaching that we ought to forgive everyone unconditionally, there is no reason to think Stephen's example is instructive for us all.

That said, I would argue that Stephen did not actually forgive anyone. The text does not say, "And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'My attackers, I forgive you for what you are about to do to me.'" Rather, he directed his words to God, petitioning God to forgive his attackers: "And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" Stephen did not pronounce forgiveness on his murderers, but interceded on their behalf to God, petitioning God to

forgive them for this evil deed. Surely, Stephen is expressing his desire for their forgiveness and his willingness to forgive, but he did not actually forgive anyone. In fact, his prayer demonstrates that he believed God alone was able to forgive them. Perhaps he prayed this prayer because (1) he knew he could not forgive them without their repentance, and (2) he would not live long enough to forgive them if they repented for this sin in the future. Indeed, Stephen's prayer was answered – at least in part – when Saul came to faith in Jesus and repented of his sins. God forgave Saul of all his sins, including his part in the murder of Stephen (Acts 8:1; 22:4; 26:10; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13).

## Questions

### How often should I forgive?

Jesus was asked this very question by His disciples (Matthew 18:21). They attempted to answer their own question by suggesting a limit of seven times a day. In my book, such a limit would be quite generous. After all, one would have to doubt the sincerity of a person's repentance if they sinned against you more than seven times in a day. Jesus, however, thought they were not being generous enough. He said "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22).<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Jesus is speaking hyperbolically. His point is not to count confessions, but to demonstrate that we should always be willing to forgive the repentant no matter how many times they sin.

If this seems unreasonable to you, consider how many times we sin against God every day? How many times do we fail to love Him with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength? How many times do we fail to love your neighbor as ourselves? How many times do we fail to love/respect our spouse? How many times do we fail to prefer others over ourselves? How many times do we experience pride, jealousy, greed, selfishness, lust, wrath, etc.? We sin many times in many ways against God each day, and yet He continues to forgive us day-in and day-out. He is simply asking us to extend the same mercy to others.

But, one will rightly object, if someone is sinning against you in the same way over and over again, surely this reveals that they are not sincere nor truly repentant. Perhaps, but perhaps not. How do we judge one's sincerity? If someone were to say they are sorry in sarcastic tone, that would be a good indication that they are not being sincere in their "repentance." But apart from sarcasm, how could we judge one's sincerity? We tend to presume that their sincerity is proven by never committing that sin again. If that were the standard, however, then we should doubt the sincerity of our own repentance toward God. After all, who hasn't had to repent multiple times for the same sin? In some cases, one can be both sincere and repeat the same sin again. For example, if I speak in a disrespectful manner to my wife, she may confront me over my behavior. I can recognize my sin and ask for her forgiveness, but still speak disrespectfully to her again in the future. The way I speak to her could be an ingrained habit that is hard to break, despite my recognition of it as sinful and despite my best intentions to never do it again. I may need her forgiveness many times for the same sin, perhaps even on the same day. Repeat offenses alone do not necessarily show that someone is disingenuous about their repentance. While one's repentance could be disingenuous, we should give them the benefit of the doubt unless we have very good reason to believe it is, in fact, disingenuous.

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<sup>14</sup>Some translations read "seventy times seven" (KJV, ASV, HCSB, LSB, NLT) while others read seventy-seven (NIV, ESV, NET, NASB, CEB, CEV, ISV). Both translations are possible. No matter how it is translated, it is clearly hyperbolic and meant to convey the point that there should be no limits to forgiveness.

### Is there a difference between mere confession and repentance?

Yes, I think there is a difference between mere confession and repentance. While all repentance entails confession of one's guilt, not all confession of guilt includes true repentance. One might be more than happy to admit that they were wrong, and yet still resolve to keep committing that sin in the future. Or, they might confess their wrongdoing and yet not seek forgiveness because they do not want to restore the relationship with the person they sinned against. Some people will confess their sins out of a sense of moral obligation, having no intention of restoring the relationship they fractured by their sin. Their confession is for selfish reasons, namely to relieve their ailing conscience. If we have reason to believe that someone is confessing without repenting, we are under no obligation to forgive them. Even if we tried, they would not accept the forgiveness because they would resist all of attempts to restore the relationship.

### How do you avoid a defensive posture when confronting the offending brother?

Nobody likes confrontation, so Jesus' instruction to confront the offending brother will be difficult for many to put into practice. We know that people rarely "receive" correction well, and many will become defensive at any hint that they have done wrong. Jesus was aware of this as well, which is why He created an escalation process to deal with this.

However, the way we approach the offending brother may help mitigate a defensive posture. People often get defensive when they feel like they are being attacked. To avoid making them feel attacked, don't verbally berate them or demand their repentance. Avoid using "you" statements, and focus on how the person's actions made you feel rather than on the wrongness of the actions. By doing so, you invite them to be part of the solution rather than merely making them out be the problem. Of course, some people will still get defensive despite being approached in this way. This can't be avoided entirely. If, however, you've done your part to raise the issue in as non-threatening and loving manner as possible, their defensiveness may just be a symptom of their lack of repentance.

### Are we required to forgive a cheating spouse?

If the act of forgiveness entails the cancellation of one's moral debt, and the purpose of cancelling that moral debt is to reconcile the relationship, how does that square with Jesus' teaching that one can divorce their spouse for sexual immorality (Matthew 5:32; 19:9)? If the cheating spouse repents, wouldn't the innocent spouse be required to forgive them (i.e. cancel the moral debt), and thus lose their grounds for divorce? After all, once the moral debt has been expunged from their account, they can no longer be considered to be or treated as guilty of that sin. If they are not guilty of that sin, they cannot be divorced for that sin. If the innocent spouse divorces the repentant, cheating spouse, wouldn't that be an act of unforgiveness?

This is a difficult question, and one that Jesus did not address. Jesus simply taught that one cannot divorce and remarry except in cases where their spouse commits sexual immorality. He did not qualify this in any way. He did not specify that this only applied to an unrepentant spouse, and thus we should not presume that Jesus' teaching is based on the assumption that the guilty spouse is unrepentant. It is best to understand Jesus' teaching as a general principle that applies whether the spouse repents or not. It would follow, then, that Jesus did not require forgiveness in this situation. The innocent spouse is not required to restore a relationship that has been damaged by infidelity. The terms of the marriage covenant have been violated, and therefore the victim has every right to end that covenant. While the innocent spouse is always free to forgive their cheating spouse and restore the relationship, they are also free not to forgive their spouse by ending the relationship via divorce.

### How do you forgive those with whom you had no relationship?

Imagine that some stranger murdered your family member. What would forgiveness of such an individual look like? If forgiveness entails the restoration of a relationship, how do you forgive someone with whom you have no previous relationship? There is nothing to restore.

This question brings up a vital distinction that we must keep in mind: There is a difference between what forgiveness *is* and what forgiveness is *for* (i.e. the purpose or reason for forgiveness). Forgiveness *is* a choice one makes to no longer hold a person's sin against them. It *is* an act by which the victim expunges the record of the sinner. The reason we forgive, however, is (1) because God commands us to and (2) forgiveness is the means by which relationships fractured by sin can be restored.

In the case of the repentant stranger who murdered a family member, one can still complete the act of forgiveness for the primary purpose of obeying God, even if this act cannot achieve the secondary purpose for forgiveness, namely reconciliation. The purpose of forgiveness is to restore relationships that were fractured by sin, not to force us to start relationships with people that we do not know. Sin cannot fracture a relationship that never existed, and one cannot restore a relationship that never existed. That means one does not need to start a relationship with the murderer to fully forgive him. One can fully forgive the murderer simply by choosing to no longer hold his sin against him. Nothing else is required.